SAM HOUSTON

AND

THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE IN TEXAS

CHAPTER I

BOYHOOD AND YOUTH

SAMUEL, or as he called and signed himself, and as he is known in the familiar language of history, Sam Houston, was born on the 2d of March, 1793, at a place called Timber Ridge Church, about seven miles east of Lexington, in Rockbridge County, Virginia. He came from that strong and sturdy Scotch-Irish stock which has given so many notable names to American history and exercised so powerful an influence in the formative period of the nation. There was a good deal in Sam Houston's character and temperament to indicate a Celtic admixture in the somewhat dour and sober strain of the Presbyterian Scotch-Irish, but there is no name in the records of the family genealogy to indicate it, and it must have been from very remote atavism or the accident of individual constitution. The Houston family was of Lowland-Scotch origin, of sufficient rank to have a coat of arms, and representatives of its branches have occupied positions of provincial im-

portance. There is a family tradition that its representative took part in the defense of Londonderry, but as there is also one that John Houston, the founder of the American branch of the family, came to this country in 1689, the year of the siege, this may be considered as doubtful so far as the immediate ancestor of Houston is concerned. The name of James Huston is, however, to be found attached to the loyal address to King William by the defenders of Londonderry signed the 29th of July, 1689. John Houston, who was possessed of considerable means and was apparently the leader of an emigrant colony of his compatriots, settled in Philadelphia, and left a numerous family of children. His grandson Robert Houston removed to Virginia, purchased a considerable tract of land in Rockbridge County, and married a lady of the Scotch families of Davidson and Dunlop. He also left a numerous family, who became connected with the representatives of the gentry of the neighborhood. His son Samuel inherited the estate and married a Miss Elisabeth Paxton, whose family had been associated with his own in the emigration from Ireland and its subsequent life in America. The position of the family in Virginia was evidently not that of the manorial gentry of the seaboard and eastern river valleys, but that of the wealthier farmers of the interior, who lived in rude plenty mainly by their own labor, and formed a class of substantial and independent yeomen. Samuel Houston served with credit, if not with great distinction, in General Daniel

Morgan's brigade of riflemen during the Revolutionary War, and at its close was appointed Major and Assistant Inspector-General of the frontier troops. He died while on a tour of duty in the Alleghany Mountains in 1806, leaving his widow with a family of six sons and three daughters. Tradition describes Major Houston as a man of large frame, commanding presence, indomitable courage and a passion for military life. Mrs. Houston was also remarkable for her magnificent physique, and was a woman of great force of character, respected and beloved in the neighborhood for her benevolence and helpfulness, and impressing her individuality and influence deeply upon the mind and memory of the most distinguished of her children, who always spoke of her with reverence and affection. After the death of her husband, with the vigor and energy characteristic of that pioneer age, she determined to remove to the new settlements in Tennessee; and with her young family, Sam being then thirteen years of age, she crossed the Alleghany Mountains, and settled in Blount County at a point eight miles east of the Tennessee River, then the boundary between the tribe of Cherokee Indians and their white neighbors. Here a cabin was built, a clearing was opened, and the family lived in the rude and toilsome frontier fashion, while wresting a living from the wilderness.

Houston's reminiscences of his boyhood included a few months of schooling in what was called the "Old Field School," kept in a dilapidated building in the

neighborhood, once occupied by Washington University, which had been removed to Lexington; and that he used to run from his work in the fields to take his place in the spelling class. Only the simplest rudiments of an education could have been given in a country school in a thinly peopled agricultural neighborhood like that of Rockbridge County, and in a pioneer settlement like that in East Tennessee the opportunities must have been even less. Whatever education Houston acquired in his early youth must have been due to his active mind and fervid imagination, eagerly feeding upon what books came in his way and possessing them with a fullness and reality unknown to those whose minds are satiated and dulled with an abundance and variety of reading. Among the few books which had come to the frontier settlement in the pack-saddles and in the corners of chests among the homespun garments and household implements, and which were read by the light of the fat pine fire, was Pope's translation of the Iliad, and this was devoured by the boy with all the fervid appetite of vigorous youthful imagination, until he knew it nearly by heart. The artificiality of Pope's style, which is an offense and an obstruction to the refined literary taste that requires the purest flavor for its fastidious palate, was no drawback in the eager appetite of the boy to the appreciation of the reality of the heroic figures and the fresh and immortal drama of human life behind it; and the battles on the windy plains of the Scamander, the camp-fires,

the ships, and the walls of Troy were as visible and real to him as the woods and fields of the Tennessee valleys. Such a book was an education in itself in all that relates to human life, in the elevation of the spirit and the kindling of the imagination. Throughout his life Houston was a man of few books. When commander of the Texas army he deeply studied Cæsar's Commentaries for their simple and sagacious lessons of war, which he assimilated with a native intuition, as well as for the severe fascination of the narrative. He read and appreciated Shakespeare and had some familiarity with the standards of English classical literature; in his later years, after he became "converted," he read the Bible thoroughly and constantly, so that its phraseology tinged his oratory. But his reading was always limited. His wisdom and knowledge came from contact with men; and his literary gifts, his power of vigorous and impressive writing on great subjects, and his persuasive and figurative eloquence were due to native faculties, to the power of his mind compelling appropriate words, and the kindling force of his genius elevating and illuminating common speech, and not to any training in the arts of rhetoric or the study of masters of language and expression.

It was during his early residence in East Tennessee that occurred the first of his recorded escapades, that breaking out of the wild blood, the longing for adventure and the free life of the wilderness in the companionship of its children, which characterized his

whole career and was a part of his nature. He had been placed by his elder brothers as a clerk in a trader's store, but his restless spirit revolted at the tame life behind the counter and the drudgery of the boxes and barrels, and one day he absconded across the Tennessee River to take up his abode with the Cherokees. He was received into their cabins as a friend and a brother, whose natural tastes and instincts were their own, and acquired that knowledge of and sympathy with the Indian character which he manifested through life. It is in a great measure an instinct, a kindred element in the blood, the inheritance of primitive nature, which enables men like Houston and many other pioneer adventurers and soldiers to be thoroughly at home in the Indian camps, to share the emotions and thoughts of their savage friends, and to govern and be trusted by them through the community as well as the superiority of their powers. The records of history and of travel are full of the examples of men of civilized training and scholarly culture who were never so much at home as when in the company of the children of the desert and the forest, whose simple natures they appreciated, and whose wild and free life had an irresistible touch of sympathy with their own instincts; and the rule of inveterate hostility and antagonism between the white settlers of America and the aborigines has often been broken by cases of natural attraction and the adoption of savage life and companionship by the members of the civilized race. Houston had many of

the characteristics of the Indian in his nature: his hot blood, his strong passions and appetites, his fondness for adventure and the untrammeled freedom of the wilderness, his solemnly childish vanity and turn for histrionic effect; as well as the higher qualities of the native chief, a commanding personal power and impressiveness, a shrewdness like that of Ulysses in managing men and affairs, an eloquence of original power and impressiveness, a loftiness of spirit and the dominant quality of determination and courage. All these qualities were doubtless visible in the youth as in the man, and Houston was made welcome to the Cherokee villages and adopted into the family of one of the sub-chiefs of the tribe. He thoroughly acquired the Cherokee language, which is so difficult that it is said never to have been learned by an adult, wore the native dress, and was to all intents and purposes an Indian. It is to be said that the Cherokees were among the most intelligent and civilized of the North American Indians, lived in cabins instead of wigwams, cultivated fields, and in some instances at this time owned negro slaves, had a written language of their own invention, and were not greatly different in their habits and manners of life from their pioneer neighbors. But they were Indians, and the flavor of wildness was as distinct among them as among the gypsies, and this was what attracted Houston and made him at home among them. When the place of his retreat was discovered he was visited by his brothers, who endeavored to persuade him to

return home; but he replied, with that touch of grandiloquence which always distinguished him, that he preferred measuring deer-tracks to measuring tape, and that they might leave him in the woods. He remained with the Cherokees until his eighteenth year, occasionally returning to the white settlements for the supplies wanted for himself and his friends.

At this time, finding himself in debt for the ammunition and trinkets which he had purchased, he resolved to return to civilization, and wipe off the debt by opening a country school. The standard of qualification could not have been beyond the most rudimentary elements, or, with all his courage and self-confidence, Houston would not have attempted to fill it. It is recorded through his reminiscences that he raised the price of tuition from six to eight dollars per annum, one third payable in corn at thirty-three and one half cents per bushel, one third in cash, and one third in variegated cotton goods, such as made the teacher's hunting shirt. Houston's popular attributes were illustrated in the success of his school, which soon included most of the children of the neighborhood, and enabled him to pay off his not very formidable debt.

A glimpse of Houston at this time was given by himself in conversation with Colonel Peter Burke, an old comrade of the Indian wars, who had emigrated to Texas after the annexation. He met Houston, then a senator of the United States, on the steamboat going up the Buffalo Bayou from Galveston to the

town of Houston. There was a warm greeting between the old comrades, and they sat long on the deck exchanging reminiscences. Finally, the conversation turned upon Houston's successful career, and Colonel Burke said, "Now, Houston, you have been Commander-in-chief of the Texan army, President of the Republic, and Senator of the United States. In which of these offices, or at what period in your career, have you felt the greatest pride and satisfaction?" "Well, Burke," said Houston, "when a young man in Tennessee I kept a country school, being then about eighteen years of age, and a tall, strapping fellow. At noon after the luncheon, which I and my pupils ate together out of our baskets, I would go out into the woods, and cut me a 'sour wood' stick, trim it carefully in circular spirals, and thrust one half of it into the fire, which would turn it blue, leaving the other half white. With this emblem of ornament and authority in my hand, dressed in a hunting-shirt of flowered calico, a long queue down my back, and the sense of authority over my pupils, I experienced a higher feeling of dignity and self-satisfaction than from any office or honor which I have since held."

After teaching for a time Houston attended a session or two of the Academy at Maryville, which completed all the education that he was ever to receive from the schools. The war between the United States and Great Britain had broken out, and the drum was beaten on the frontier for recruits. In 1813 a recruiting party visited Maryville, and

Houston enlisted as a private soldier, being then in his twentieth year. He replied to the remonstrances of his friends at the supposed degradation of his enlistment with his customary grandiloquence and self-confidence, that he would sooner honor the ranks than disgrace an appointment, and that they should hear of him. According to his reminiscences in later life his mother admonished him in the spirit and almost in the language of a Roman matron of the melodramatic stage, handing him his musket at the cabin door, and saying, "There, my son, take this musket, and never disgrace it; for remember, I had rather all my sons should fill one honorable grave than that one of them should turn his back to save his life. Go; and remember, too, that while the door of my cabin is open to brave men, it is eternally shut to all cowards!" These words show that Mrs. Houston was remarkably like her son in the use of inflated language, or that he supplied what he considered the proper expression to a more plain-spoken but vigorous and spirited admonition.